HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security

SECU • NUMBER 126 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, September 25, 2018

Chair

The Honourable John McKay

Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.)): I call to order meeting number 126.

It is my privilege to welcome Minister Blair on behalf of the committee.

Congratulations on the appointment. I hope you see this committee as a committee that you can readily access and that will be helpful to your mandate.

I will ask Minister Blair to make a presentation, and then we'll go around with the usual rounds of questions.

Again, welcome. I look forward to your statement.

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and committee members. I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to join you today.

As you can see, I am joined by senior officials from departments that play a very significant role in my responsibilities. I'm very grateful for their support today.

As you have stated, Mr. Chair, this is my first opportunity to meet with you in my new capacity as the minister for border security and organized crime reduction. I very much look forward to the opportunity to work with this committee. I see it as a valuable source of insight and advice that will assist me, the government and the responsible departments and agencies in their important work.

As the minister, my overarching goal is to help ensure that our borders remain secure and to lead cross-governmental efforts to reduce organized crime. I and my officials have been working hard to get a head start on the priorities under that banner, which have been entrusted to me by the Prime Minister.

The issues we are tackling are not confined to a single department or agency. They run across government, whether we're looking at cannabis, irregular migration, guns and gangs, organized crime or opioids. That is why the Prime Minister has asked me to work with the full support of all of the relevant departments to ensure a coordinated and effective approach to these very important critical issues.

I am fortunate to have already forged a solid working relationship with many of the departments with which I now work when I served as the parliamentary secretary to two ministers and had the opportunity to work across ministries on important issues. I look forward to working with all of my cabinet colleagues and fellow parliamentarians on both sides of the House.

I am pleased to provide some insight to you today as to how I intend to deliver upon my mandate.

First, I would like to begin by thanking this committee for their excellent and important work in their careful scrutiny of Bill C-71, which yesterday, I am pleased to say, passed the House at third reading.

We cannot ignore the reality that offences involving firearms have been increasing over the last five years. I have seen that first-hand, not only in my city but in communities across the country. I am pleased that this crucial legislation makes common-sense proposals to keep guns out of the wrong hands, to improve licensing classification and to strengthen records commitments.

Thank you for your amendments. Thanks to those amendments, the bill was further strengthened to propose additional background-check criteria related to violent behaviour, which must be considered before a licence will be issued.

Additionally, you made helpful proposals to clarify non-restricted firearm transfers and to providing greater certainty that no federal registry will be created with the enactment of Bill C-71 when it becomes law. These are welcome additions to an already strong set of new measures aimed at reducing firearms-related crime in Canada. I am proud that I have been given a responsibility to support Minister Goodale as this bill moves forward through the Senate.

As my mandate letter has indicated, I have also been given responsibilities to examine ways to reduce gun crime involving use of handguns and assault rifles while not impeding the lawful use of firearms by lawful firearm owners. Therefore, I will be beginning a formal process of engaging with Canadians on this important issue. Over the next month, my parliamentary secretary and I will host round tables across the country.

I'll stop here and introduce my parliamentary secretary, who I believe is with us today, Mr. Peter Schiefke.

We will host a series of round tables across the country to hear from a wide range of expertise and opinions. We will also be soliciting feedback from law enforcement, municipalities and indigenous communities, and as well, of course, our provincial and territorial colleagues. In addition, we will create an online portal so that all Canadians can provide their thoughts on this important issue.

Our government is open to looking at any measure that will be effective in keeping our communities safe. We have already invested over $327 million in initiatives to reduce gun crime and criminal gang activities. The majority of this funding will be going to provinces and territories to bolster local prevention and enforcement programs.

I want to emphasize that we need to take a broad and all-encompassing approach to reducing violence in our communities. In my time as a police officer and a police chief, I learned that in high-crime neighbourhoods there tends to be only a small number of people who victimize law-abiding people who are struggling with disadvantage. Those neighbourhoods often have higher rates of poverty, poor housing, higher rates of problematic substance use, a lack of jobs, a lack of access to mental health and other services, a lack of opportunity and a lack of hope. These are what are sometimes referred to as the social determinants of crime and victimization.

● (1535)

I can tell you that in my city we made every effort to ensure that we had a robust and visible police presence on the streets, but we've always held that addressing the social circumstances that give rise to violence is the other important part of that equation.

In my experience, you cannot arrest your way out of these very complex social issues. Our government has taken steps to address these challenges. We've created the first-ever national housing strategy. We've implemented the Canada child benefit, which is addressing child and family poverty, and we have increased the amount of money that is available for youth employment. We will continue to work closely with all of our colleagues in all departments to make sure that the government is doing all that it can to address crime.

The same must go for our approach to opioids. The impact of opioids, as this committee well knows, is being felt in communities of all sizes in every part of Canada. In the last two years, over 8,000 Canadian lives have been cut short due to opioid-related overdoses.

I have been given the responsibility of leading our work in reducing the smuggling of opioids across the border. Canada has a four-pillar strategy—a national strategy for drugs—and an important part of that strategy is law enforcement. It is dealing with that issue of interdicting the supply of drugs, principally opioids, and some of the precursor chemicals used in their manufacture, as well as other materials.

Law enforcement is an important part of this puzzle, and it will be supported. As we work with partners to interdict the illegal supply, we also intend to do so in the context of the other pillars: demand reduction, harm reduction, and treatment and rehabilitation. This will involve a public health lens to address the illegal supply and distribution. It includes pursuing law enforcement activities to counter drug trafficking in a manner that also balances health and safety concerns.

Mr. Chair, in my experience, this is a transnational issue. I look forward to the opportunity to ensure that we are well equipped at our borders to maintain their security and that we are able to tackle this problem with a whole-of-government approach. It also necessitates —and I am familiar with—a strong collaboration between Canadian and American law enforcement and law enforcement around the world.

The illegal movement of narcotics and other poisonous drugs into our communities is a transnational crime problem, and it is one that requires a global response.

With respect to our other immediate priorities, we are, of course, only a few weeks away—22 days away as my colleague from Health Canada advises me—from the beginning of a transition to a legal adult-use cannabis regime in Canada. It is important to remember that the transition to legal cannabis will be a process and not a single event.

We will continue to work collaboratively with all of our cabinet colleagues on the implementation of this new form of effective cannabis control, and we are working collaboratively with the provinces, the territories, municipalities, law enforcement and stakeholders across the country to ensure an orderly and responsible implementation.

We believe that this new system will do a far better job than the failed current criminal prohibition in protecting our children from the harms of cannabis consumption and in protecting the health and safety of all Canadians, and it will take billions of dollars in profit out of the hands of organized crime.

With respect to my mandate commitments on irregular migration, the safe third country agreement and opportunities surrounding concurrence operations for travellers, I am keen to move forward quickly on these issues as well. I have discussed the former with the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. I look forward to providing updates in the very near future. I feel that both Canada and the U.S. have an opportunity to demonstrate how our close partnership can help us adapt to evolving and complex migration challenges while managing the border effectively. To that end, I have written to the Secretary of Homeland Security to begin discussions about how the safe third country agreement can be improved and enhanced to the mutual benefit of both countries.

Through all of these commitments, Mr. Chair, I'm honoured to carry out the responsibilities that have been entrusted to me. I look forward to your continued advice and engagement in keeping our borders secure and our communities safe.

Thank you very much. I look forward to your questions.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Blair.

You certainly make a chair's heart go pitter-patter because you stayed within the time limits.

The first round is seven minutes. First up is Michel Picard.

Mr. Michel Picard (Montarville, Lib.): Thank you.

Welcome, Mr. Minister.

Welcome everyone.

Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions. My first questions will talk about customs and asylum seekers. I am from Quebec and, of course, this issue was a bit complicated last year. Obviously, we have not heard about it that much this year. Would you please expand on the progress and your learning experience from last year, on what happened this year, and maybe put the record straight as of today?

Hon. Bill Blair: Last year, as you are all aware, Canada experienced a significant increase in the number of people who were seeking asylum who presented themselves irregularly at our borders, not at a regular border point but at various crossings. The issue impacted a number of communities but I think was most significantly impactful in the area of Lacolle, Quebec.

The government and the agencies responsible began very quickly to develop and increase their capacity to ensure that for people who were crossing at the border our Canadian safety was maintained. So the RCMP—and I would commend them for their excellent work; I've been to Lacolle and I've watched—ensure that anyone coming across the border at any place is subject to a vigorous security background check to ensure that there is no criminality or threat to national security.

They've been working very closely with the officers and agents of the CBSA and the IRCC in order to ensure that those people are properly processed.

We have also recognized that in the processing of those individuals there's a significant backlog because of the surge and the capacity of the IRB, the Immigration and Refugee Board, and the capacity of the agencies and departments responsible had been significantly limited by, quite frankly, a decade of underfunding. We have been restoring that funding. Some $173 million has been invested into improving the efficiency of the process by which we are now conducting these hearings to which people are lawfully entitled to determine their admissibility. We are also, after nearly $400 million in cuts at CBSA, restoring their capacity by investments of nearly $72 million to increase their ability to remove individuals who have been deemed inadmissible as quickly as possible.

Now we remain absolutely committed to upholding Canadian law and Canadian humanitarian principles, and we are starting to see some success.

We've also made significant efforts in reaching out to the United States, reaching out to NGOs and community groups that have been working with the people who present themselves at our borders, and we've seen some success.

For example, I had a conversation with our colleague, the member representing Emerson, Manitoba. I asked him about their experience, because in the winter of 2017 many people were irregularly crossing at a border near his community. I asked him what the current experience was, and he advised me that after the Minister of Immigration went to Minneapolis, met with the community groups down there, explained to them that presenting yourself at the border and seeking asylum is not a free ticket to permanent residency and that they were going to be subject to legal processes and subject to removal if they were deemed ineligible, that flow significantly reduced.

We've seen progress in these other areas, and so far in the last four or five months of the summer that has just immediately passed, we've seen a significant reduction of up to 70% fewer people who are presenting themselves at our border than was the case last year.

● (1545)

Mr. Michel Picard: Thank you.

I was happy to read in your mandate letter that you will address organized crime issues, and you know my interest on financial fraud. The RCMP knows that as well.

There have been a number of changes at the RCMP and challenges also to address investigations of commercial crimes. We still have some work to do. We still have some issues to cover. There has been discussion about, for example, beneficiary ownership to go further in the fight against financial crime.

There are issues also at the RCMP with recruiting, where we need our expert resources to as much as possible remain in those departments focusing on financial crime, which is such a specialized department. What is your take on that?

Hon. Bill Blair: Within my responsibilities is to address the issues of organized crime. You and I have a shared experience in the enforcement of the laws and these crimes. Also, we are informed by some recent and very important work that was done by Dr. Peter German, for example, in British Columbia looking at money laundering through the casinos out there. I've spoken to Dr. German. He's an old friend and colleague, and we have much work to do there.

But it is fair, I think, to acknowledge that over a period of time the capacity of the RCMP and the expertise to conduct those investigations was diminished, and there are a number of reasons for that. I don't think finger-pointing is very helpful in this at all. I think what is necessary is to restore that capacity. I've had conversations with the commissioner, and my colleague could perhaps also comment. We recognize that it's an important responsibility of the RCMP. As a member of the Canadian police community in the past, I will tell you that we relied heavily on the RCMP and its expertise in the conduct of these investigations. Municipal and provincial police services across the country work very much in collaboration and partnership with the RCMP because of that expertise in such areas as the integrated enforcement teams and the combined forces special enforcement units, in economic crime investigations. That's very important work.

My responsibility will be to look and to see if there are regulatory changes or changes to legislation that will enhance our ability to deal with issues of beneficial ownership and to strengthen our capacity to deal effectively and to be able to prosecute offenders for those important crimes.

Mr. Michel Picard: Has the RCMP started to approach the recruitment and the resources differently? We do have an issue, because there's pressure coming from national security. They get all the staff moving to national security, therefore compromising capacity not only for financial crimes, but in other departments.

The Chair: Very briefly, please.

Hon. Bill Blair: Operational decisions made by the members of the RCMP with the deployment of their limited resources need to be made in the national interest, and I have every confidence in their leadership.

We also recognize that the deployment of officers and expertise to deal with national security or terrorist financing, which are critically important to the safety and security of this country, can result in a diminished capacity to conduct other forms of investigation. We'll continue to work to ensure the members of the RCMP get the resources that they identify, that they need, to do the important work for which we rely upon them.

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Picard.

Ms. Rempel, welcome to the committee. You have seven minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Has the Prime Minister given you a mandate to stop people from illegally crossing the border from safe spaces like upstate New York and subsequently claiming asylum in Canada?

Hon. Bill Blair: My mandate is very clear. First of all, the entrance of people coming to our borders is governed by a number of pieces of legislation, including, for example, the safe third country agreement with the United States. That is a bilateral agreement between our two countries—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sure, but again, has the Prime Minister—

Hon. Bill Blair: I'm sorry. I thought you wanted an answer.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'm just asking you a yes-or-no question. Has the Prime Minister given you a mandate to stop people from illegally crossing the border from safe spaces like upstate New York into Canada? Is your mandate to bring the numbers significantly down?

Hon. Bill Blair: My responsibility is to ensure the border integrity and border security and to manage the issue of irregular migration. Unfortunately, Ms. Rempel—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: It's to manage—

Hon. Bill Blair: —it's not a simple yes-or-no answer. It's an answer that—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: But it is—

Hon. Bill Blair: —has a number of components, including working with the United States to look at enhancing the safe third country agreement—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay.

Hon. Bill Blair: —and also making significant investments in ensuring that we can manage—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'm sure you're going to spend—

Hon. Bill Blair: —that flow in an efficient and safe manner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —a lot of money, Minister.

My question, to be clear, is that my understanding now is that you do not have a mandate to stop people from illegally crossing the border from safe spaces like upstate New York and claiming asylum in Canada—that it's just spending the money.

● (1550)

Hon. Bill Blair: No. I would disagree entirely with—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay. Great—

Hon. Bill Blair: —that characterization, but my responsibility is to ensure that Canadian law is upheld—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Great—

Hon. Bill Blair: —and Canadian humanitarian principles are adhered to—

The Chair: I would just say to both the minister and the member that it works a lot better when you don't talk over each other. If we could just let the question be the question and the answer be the answer...?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, just to be clear, I should just clarify the rules. This is my time.

The Chair: It is your time. I don't disagree with you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I have been asking the minister a yes-or-no question, which he has not answered, so just to be clear, I'm managing my time, thank you.

The Chair: That's actually not a point of order—

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: —but I do take your point.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

The Chair: I would reiterate the point that for the purposes of clarification it works better when we don't talk over each other. Thank you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you, so—

The Chair: Excuse me. I'm sorry, Ms. Rempel.

Ms. Sahota?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: My point of order is in response to Ms. Rempel. Asking a question is not badgering the witness and I think that's what's happening here.

The Chair: Okay. Again, that's not so much a point of order as a point of interruption.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: May I respond to that?

The Chair: We're starting to use up your time, though.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay. I'm at a minute and 50 seconds now?

The Chair: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: All right. Thank you.

Minister, for clarification, you have not stated that your mandate is to reduce people, so I'll ask you a simple question. What is the tolerable limit, per your mandate, for people illegally crossing the border from upstate New York and claiming asylum in Canada and subsequently abusing our asylum system? What is the number that you're managing to in your mandate?

Hon. Bill Blair: I would much prefer that people would present themselves at regular border points, and we're going to do everything possible to encourage that, including in discussions with the United States.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: But what does success look like? Is it zero? Is it 10,000? Is it 20,000? What are you managing to?

Hon. Bill Blair: Success would be that all people coming to this country would cross at a regular border point.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So zero—you don't want anybody to illegally cross the border from the United States into Canada.

Hon. Bill Blair: We're going to do everything we can to encourage people to cross regularly into our borders.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How many are you going to allow? What is that number?

Hon. Bill Blair: We are going to deal with everyone who comes to our border according to Canadian law and international convention.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: If you don't have a mandate to stop people, what are you going to tell the Secretary of Homeland Security in the U.S.? What's the number that you're going to tell him you'd like to get to? Is it zero?

Hon. Bill Blair: It's actually a "her". It's Secretary Nielsen.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sure.

Hon. Bill Blair: What I am going to say is that I believe there are opportunities to negotiate and enhance a safe third country agreement that will operate more effectively to the mutual benefit of both countries.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: But you can't negotiate that without understanding if you want to stop this phenomenon. Are you going to the negotiating table with the Americans saying, "We would like to stop this from occurring and get to zero"?

Hon. Bill Blair: The original intent of the safe third country agreement, when it was signed in 2004, was to more effectively manage the migration of people through regular border points. I am aim towards working with the Secretary in the United States to ensure—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So you don't have a number that you're trying to reduce it to.

Hon. Bill Blair: As I've said, ideally we will—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How can you manage without a target?

Hon. Bill Blair: —encourage everyone who comes to Canada's borders to cross at a regular border point.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So that's zero.

Hon. Bill Blair: We will encourage everyone who comes to Canada to cross into the country at a regular border point.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So success is zero.

Hon. Bill Blair: Success is getting everyone who comes to this country—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Zero.

Hon. Bill Blair: —to cross into the country at a regular border point.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Well, that is frightening.

Your government said that you would be agreeing to pay for hotel rooms until September 30 for the illegal border crossers who are currently in the greater Toronto area. Will you be continuing to pay for hotel rooms after September 30?

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: For how long?

Hon. Bill Blair: I've spoken to the mayor of Toronto. As part of its temporary housing strategy dealing with people who require temporary shelter, the City of Toronto has a system whereby some of that is done through rental accommodation. I've spoken to the mayor and told him that we will continue to support their important work of providing temporary shelter for those individuals who need it.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: If you don't have a number that you're managing to, this year, to reduce the target, how many more people are you anticipating you'll have to house in hotels at taxpayer's expense?

Hon. Bill Blair: The number of people who went into that temporary shelter has been diminishing over time, and the City of Toronto is doing an excellent job, in my opinion, of helping those people find more permanent housing solutions. The City of Toronto is also managing the existing capacity quite well for those coming in.

● (1555)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'll take it you don't have a number for that either.

In an interview, you said that the IRB backlog would decrease, but they—well, they don't report to you, so I can understand why they would contradict you—contradicted your answer and said that the numbers would not decrease given the considerable increase year over year.

Hon. Bill Blair: I was speaking of two things, Ms. Rempel. First of all, we have invested a significant amount of money—some $74 million—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'm sure it's more expensive.

Hon. Bill Blair: —in increasing the capacity of the IRB. This increases their capacity to about 17,000 additional hearings each year, but we are—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Right, but they said it would not decrease.

Hon. Bill Blair: —making additional investments and doing additional work in reducing the number who are presenting themselves—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Do you acknowledge—

Hon. Bill Blair: —and in my opinion, the combination of all of those things will be effective in reducing the backlog.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Are you contradicting the IRB's assertion that the backlog won't decrease?

Hon. Bill Blair: If all we were going to do was increase IRB's capacity by the current amount we've increased it, which is 17,000 per year, that would simply be consumed by the existing backlog, which they inherited, but we are doing other measures as well, which I believe will be effective in reducing that backlog.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: What you've just said is that you have no target by which to reduce the numbers. You're keeping people in hotels, and you're adding more bureaucrats and hundreds of millions of dollars to process people who are abusing our asylum system.

Hon. Bill Blair: Let me be very clear. We're adding people who actually do the important work of conducting these hearings.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So that's a yes.

Hon. Bill Blair: Under Canadian law, people are entitled to due process—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You have no plan to reduce this.

Hon. Bill Blair: —and the capacity to do those hearings was very significantly underfunded and diminished for a long period of time, and we're restoring it.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Rempel.

Mr. Dubé, presumably for a less spirited exchange, you have seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Beloeil—Chambly, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for joining us, Mr. Minister.

I would like to talk about the situation of migrants, especially in terms of the negotiations with the Americans. You alluded to it in your comments, and also when you replied to my Conservative colleague.

Our concern stems from a report broadcast last May, if I am not mistaken, which said that several options were on the table. You are very familiar with the NDP's position on this: we propose suspending the safe third country agreement between Canada and the United States. One of the possibilities raised at the time, which Canada was ready to accept, was to enforce the agreement along the whole length of the border. That is what the Conservatives are proposing. We find that proposal extremely problematic.

Are you able to tell me today, yes or no, whether that possibility is part of what is being negotiated with the Americans?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: What I can confirm is that as the agreement currently exists, the safe third country agreement applies only at regular border crossings. This is a bilateral agreement between our two countries, and we cannot unilaterally change that, although there have been a number of recommendations suggesting that we should.

We intend to have discussions. Quite frankly, the form and the outcome of those discussions, I wouldn't wish to speculate on. We will be talking to the United States Secretary of Homeland Security in order to determine if that agreement can be made more effective, enhanced, to serve the mutual interests of both countries.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Dubé: When the Government of Canada is at the negotiating table, will you or will you not exclude the possibility of enforcing the safe third country agreement between Canada and the United States along the entire length of the border? This is what the Conservative Party is proposing and it would essentially create an invisible wall along our border. I am well aware that this is a bilateral agreement, but we still have a say in the matter and we can ask for this possibility to be excluded from the negotiations. I just want to know what the Government of Canada is going to say, to the extent that it is possible for you to share that with us.

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, I don't want to get ahead of those discussions, but I will tell you that every option is on the table. I haven't ruled out any possibility.

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Thank you, Minister.

I want to move on. You mentioned the question of narcotics at the border and things like that. There are two pieces here. The first one is for marijuana. I have two questions about that.

Number one, is there any plan for Canada to firmly stand up for Canadians who will legally consume cannabis, cross the border and see their entrance to the U.S. refused? There is seemingly contradictory information that we are hearing about how that's going to apply, understanding that the U.S. can have its own laws.

Number two, is the government going to move ahead on amnesty for criminal charges for simple possession that have taken place during the time when legalization was clearly a government policy, even if the bill had not been adopted by the House of Commons, so retroactive amnesty?

● (1600)

Hon. Bill Blair: First of all, with respect to the U.S. border, we have been advised by the customs border patrol and the U.S. officials that they are not changing their policy or their line of questioning for Canadians presenting themselves at the border. Of course, as you are well aware, they are a sovereign nation, and we cannot dictate to them who they can or should allow into their country. They have indicated they have no intention of making any changes.

I will simply remind you that for the last five years, since 2013, Canada has had a very large and growing cannabis production industry for medical marijuana—licensed production—with thousands of Canadians, and which has attracted hundreds of millions of dollars in investment.

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Minister, with all due respect, I apologize for interrupting. My time is limited, and I only get one shot at this usually.

I just want to know whether you can assure this committee that Canada will be a strong voice speaking against the Americans arbitrarily refusing access to Canadians for—

Hon. Bill Blair: I wouldn't characterize it as against anyone, but we will always stand up for the lawful rights of Canadians. We are working very closely in the United States, making sure, first of all, that they understand the nature of the very strict regulatory regime we're putting in place.

We're also making sure that Canadians understand that although it may be legal on the Canadian side of the border, crossing the border with any amount of cannabis can constitute a serious criminal offence, in either direction. We want to make sure that no Canadian inadvertently gets in trouble with the law.

Mr. Matthew Dubé: I understand that. I just want to make clear that we are talking about folks who admit to having consumed but don't actually have any and are behaving in a lawful manner.

Can you address the amnesty piece?

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes. I will tell you one of the things that motivated me in this new legislation is to stop criminalizing our kids in particular. We know that's had a disparate impact in minority communities and indigenous communities.

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Will there be amnesty? Yes or no?

Hon. Bill Blair: What I will say is that how we might deal most appropriately with those existing records is very much under consideration. I don't have a final determination, but it's being given every consideration.

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Thank you, Minister.

You mentioned the issue of doing better than the current criminal prohibition. You just talked about the impact that this has on kids.

How do you square that circle with today signing on to a unilateral non-negotiable agreement with the U.S. to continue the failed war on drugs, considering that's something that has been denounced by the former prime minister of New Zealand and other world leaders, and goes against the multilateral approach your government seems to want to take?

I see a contradiction there. How do you square that circle?

Hon. Bill Blair: I would differentiate between cannabis and drugs that kill people, including the illicit opioids, crystal meth and other drugs. I think we have a responsibility to do everything possible to interdict the supply of those drugs coming in, but we have also—

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Which is fair, so why would we not do that with a multitude of countries? Why would we just take Donald Trump's unilateral proposal?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think what needs to be emphasized is that we have restored the harm reduction principle to the national drug strategy in this country. We have taken very significant steps, which I could reiterate if we had more time—and I will be happy to do it later—to ensure that harm reduction is a reality in our communities.

We're making investments, working with provinces and community organizations to restore the principle of harm reduction. This is a public health approach.

Mr. Matthew Dubé: That is fair, but I feel that if there's a unilateral proposal from the Americans and we have our other allies saying that we shouldn't be signing off on some unilateral non-negotiable agreement to continue a failed policy that goes against exactly the principles you're mentioning, how do we square that circle? Why won't Canada sit down with other countries and tackle the issue? You're absolutely right that these drugs are dangerous, but why adhere to failed policies that are being put forward by—

The Chair: You're going to have to save that answer for another opportunity.

Thank you, Mr. Dubé.

Ms. Sahota, you have seven minutes. I believe you're splitting that time with Ms. Damoff.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Yes, I am.

Thank you, Minister Blair, for being here today. These are all very important topics, and I know that Canadians are very interested in all of them. Thank you for taking on this challenging file.

In previous questioning, we heard quite a bit about reducing the number of irregular border crossers to zero. Have you looked back at data and the migration patterns that we've had over several decades? Was the irregular border crossing number zero under the Conservative government?

Hon. Bill Blair: I don't have that data, and perhaps I would ask some of the officials if they could tell you. I don't believe we ever achieved zero, but I think we should do everything possible—and that is my intent—to encourage anyone coming to Canada to cross at a regular border point. It's where the facilities and the resources are to deal with that most effectively. It is very much our intention to do everything possible to encourage those who choose to come to Canada for any reason to do so at a regular border crossing.

● (1605)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Has the number ever been zero?

Mr. Louis Dumas (Director General, Domestic Network, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): If I may, Mr. Chair, we will have to double-check, but I believe it would be very improbable.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Yes, and "very improbable" is what I've seen in my research that I've done. I've never seen the numbers so low.

I've also seen that there have been spikes at different times, given different issues that happen in global events, so what are our migration patterns? Is Canada the only country in the world that is dealing with irregular migrants? Or are other countries dealing with this? If so, what are the numbers there?

Hon. Bill Blair: I've been advised that there close to 65 million people who are currently in processes of migration. Around the world, we've seen significant movements of people and also a significant number of people who are fleeing persecution and the risk of death and are seeking asylum in various places around the world.

On the numbers that are affecting Canada, certainly it's an increase over what we previously experienced, but it's not without precedent in Canada. In 2012, as I recall, there was a significant number of people who presented themselves in seeking asylum in Canada—approximately 37,000 people. We also saw a very significant increase in 2002.

Going back through our history, with the Hungarians fleeing back in the mid-1950s and with the Vietnamese boat people, we've had significant surges of people as a result of events that take place in other parts of the world. Canada has a long tradition of upholding humanitarian principles. We just want to make sure that our laws are upheld appropriately as well.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I believe the safe third country agreement was enacted in 2002, maybe in response to some of those surges. In 2012, when you said there was a surge, did the Conservative government cancel or change the safe third country agreement?

Hon. Bill Blair: That negotiation took place in 2002 and came into effect in December of 2004. I'm not aware of any efforts made by the Canadian government subsequently to cancel that agreement or to amend it in any significant way.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: That's interesting. Thank you.

Hon. Bill Blair: It may have happened, but I'm not aware of that.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I'll pass this along to my colleague.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you, Minister, for being here.

Before I ask my question, I want to say that I have a University of Ottawa student shadowing me today: Henry Mann. I'm very proud that he's here to witness the committee meeting, but I'm really disappointed in the lack of civility that he is seeing at this table. It's unfortunate that our young people are witnessing this kind of lack of civility amongst colleagues.

My question, Minister, has to do with intimate partner violence and firearms. The Ontario coroner's death review panel showed in its most recent report, in 2016, that 26% of intimate partner deaths involved firearms. A woman wrote on my Facebook wall that she could withstand the psychological and physical abuse, but when he put the bullets in the shotgun, then she knew true terror. A study in rural Atlantic Canada found that two-thirds of women whose homes had firearms said that when they knew that firearms were present, they were less likely to come forward.

I'm just wondering if you can comment, Minister, on the correlation between firearms and intimate partner violence.

Hon. Bill Blair: I would rely on my experience as a police officer and a police chief in dealing with that in the largest urban centre in Canada. I will tell you that when police officers attend intimate partner violence, domestic violence calls, one of the very first things they will inquire about is the presence of firearms in the home because the presence of firearms in a home where domestic violence and intimate partner violence is taking place exponentially increases the risk. It's one of the first inquiries there is. With existing authorities under the Criminal Code, where the police become aware of the existence of a firearm in a home, they have the authority to remove it.

I can also tell you, through many conversations with women who have been victims of domestic violence, that one of the things that so often happens is the woman will whisper to the police officer that there's a shotgun under the bed or a firearm in the closet. The psychological trauma associated with the presence of that firearm is devastating to that individual. I agree that the presence of a firearm in the home in a domestic violence situation increases the likelihood of death.

● (1610)

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Minister.

I have about a minute left and I wanted to get you to clarify something. People crossing the border, are they irregular or are they illegal?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think the law is very clear. When someone comes across our border at an irregular point, that's unlawful. We actually have a sign up at these border points. If you go to Lacolle at the end of Roxham Road, you will see a sign there that says it's unlawful to come into the country there.

The actual stepping across the border is unlawful. But under Canadian convention and in Canadian law, when that individual makes a request to an official for asylum, their presence in the country ceases to become unlawful and they are entitled under international convention and Canadian law to a hearing of that application, so their presence is not unlawful from that point on. All of these individuals are first confronted by the RCMP. The RCMP advise them that they're not allowed to enter until they make that application. When they make that application, they're then subject to very vigorous security background checks to make sure there's no criminality. If there there is criminality, that's dealt with. If there's a national security threat, that's dealt with. But if they are making application for the protection of Canada, they are entitled to due process to determine their admissibility.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Damoff and Minister Blair.

Mr. Motz, five minutes please.

Mr. Glen Motz (Medicine Hat—Cardston—Warner, CPC): Thank you, Minister, and officials for being here today.

Minister, you have frequently referred to the idea that somehow law-abiding gun owners in Toronto are responsible for gun crime in Toronto. Your government has gleefully pushed the idea that half of crime guns in Toronto were diverted from the lawful stream, yet in reality, there is no surge in crime guns that can be traced back to licensed gun owners in your city, none. In fact, evidence from your former police service, the Toronto Police Service, suggests domestically sourced guns are closer to 10%, not the 50% that you are continuing to purport and misleading the Canadian public with.

There is, however, a continuous flow of smuggled U.S. firearms and prohibited guns that you can't buy in Canada anyway. Interestingly, last week, you were quoted as saying evidence will guide my decisions, our decisions, something you repeated again yesterday in the House, Minister.

Minister, do you actually care that there is no evidence to support a plan, your plan, to stop law-abiding gun owners from owning handguns?

Hon. Bill Blair: Let me clarify a couple of things. First of all, when I speak of gun violence, I never do so gleefully. I consider it a tragedy in many of our communities.

I also think it's very important to avail ourselves of the best available evidence, and I will acknowledge to you that the data on the origin of guns is incomplete. I can share with you that during the 10 years that I was the chief of police in Toronto, I directed my investigators to make every effort to determine the origin of all crime guns that were seized. We had, for example, a member of the ATF, the alcohol, tobacco and firearms people, embedded in our firearms unit in Toronto who assisted us tremendously in tracing the origin of those guns. We were able to determine—

Mr. Glen Motz: Fair enough, Minister.

However, these stats are recent. It drove the whole gun debate this past summer. It drove the entire ban this past summer.

Hon. Bill Blair: I'm referring to different stats.

Mr. Glen Motz: Hold on, I'm asking a question. You continue to purport that this 50% is a legitimate number when it's been proven by Toronto's own stats that it isn't.

Your mandate letter calls for an examination on a handgun ban. However, Chris Lewis, the former commissioner of the OPP, Adam Palmer, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police president, and Commissioner Lucki from the RCMP have all come out and said any such ban is not the answer. It's not going to work.

What evidence, beyond political theatre, do you have that this will actually help public safety? If you aren't listening to the experts, what evidence do you actually need to show that the handgun ban is a bad idea, that it's all smoke and politics, and for you to drop this whole charade and actually work toward the serious nature of guns, gangs, gang violence and illegal firearms in this country? What evidence is it going to take for you to look at that?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Motz, let me assure you that we will do our best to go and get the best available evidence and, where it is incomplete, try to fill in those blanks. We will also seek the advice of experts and people with various opinions and perspectives.

I have been asked to look at taking effective measures to reduce gun violence. Those measures take many forms, but they also include limiting the flow of guns into the hands of criminals who commit violent criminal acts. We know from experience, notwithstanding the incomplete data, that there are essentially two sources by which those guns can come into criminals' hands. One of them, as you quite rightly identified, is illegal smuggling from other countries, principally the United States.

I can also tell you from personal experience, because I've been involved in a number of criminal investigations, we've seen illegal diversion of handguns in the domestic market. Through either carelessness or as a result of theft and robbery, or because of criminal intent, people are selling the guns they have lawfully obtained—

● (1615)

Mr. Glen Motz: I appreciate the comments, Minister. However—

Hon. Bill Blair: So I'm going to look at any measures—

Mr. Glen Motz: —you're not presenting us with any evidence today that suggests that the numbers you're purporting...that domestically sourced firearms are the real problem in this country.

Now, you said in your opening remarks what you have said repeatedly, as has Mr. Goodale. You and your Liberal colleagues talk about an investment in gang prevention. You talk about $500 million, with $327 million announced during a by-election in Surrey. As to the reason why your government passed yesterday, through the Senate, Bill C-71...which does nothing to stop gangs and gun violence in our country. However, just last week you tabled a document in the House that confirmed that you haven't spent a dime of the $327 million that was promised over a year ago. It's going to take another two years, or a year and a half, for it to even be rolled out.

Why? I guess that's my question. What is stopping that money from being spent on law enforcement, on the labs, on all the work it takes to keep Canadians safe and deal with public safety, not just a charade?

Hon. Bill Blair: The document that was tabled was—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Motz.

I don't know that Mr. Motz really wanted an answer to his question, because he's run out of time.

Mr. Spengemann, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Sven Spengemann (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.): Minister Blair, welcome, and thank you for being with us.

In your exchange with Monsieur Dubé, you touched on the restoration of the harm reduction principle. It was something you wanted to elaborate on when the time ran out, so I want to give you an opportunity to finish the point you were making.

Hon. Bill Blair: In my experience, when we're dealing with something as complex as the opioid crisis, a focus that's entirely on enforcement misses important work. We know that a number of people are naive users. The range of Canadians having difficulties with substance use and misuse and in serious jeopardy of overdosing as a result of this drug has demanded a different and more robust response.

We have worked very hard and diligently with public health officials, with law enforcement and with people right across this country to restore the important principle of harm reduction. We have supported communities that have wanted to establish opioid prevention centres and supervised injection sites. We've also made sure we made the antidote naloxone available to law enforcement, to first responders, to those who can save lives.

We are looking at every measure possible to reduce the harm that these drugs are causing. In the last two years, 8,000 Canadians have lost their lives to this. Frankly, in my experience you can't arrest your way out of that. We have to do everything that is necessary. That includes supply interdiction and enforcement certainly, but it also includes reducing the demand for these drugs through public education, helping those naive users to be safer, and for those experiencing difficulty with these drugs, a harm reduction strategy that saves lives. For those who wish to enter into treatment, that treatment and rehabilitation should be readily available to them in a timely way.

We believe all four pillars are necessary to make this work.

Mr. Sven Spengemann: Thank you very much for that.

Minister Blair, can you give the committee an appreciation of how important international co-operation is in your work on organized crime reduction? This is not just with allies bilaterally but even all the way up to the international organizations, including the UN. How much work is done internationally to help us do our job here?

Hon. Bill Blair: I wouldn't presume to speak for the RCMP, but I chaired the national organized crime committee in Canada for almost a decade. I'm a graduate of the FBI. I have worked collaboratively with the Homeland Security committee on national security and organized crime. We work with Interpol. We work with Europol. We have very close collaboration with UNODC, the United Nations organization on drug control, and are working in southeast Asia, because we know that's the source of many of these drugs and precursor chemicals. There's important ongoing collaboration taking place under the leadership of the RCMP through its federal policing division but also involving all levels of law enforcement.

Quite simply, when we talk about stopping things at the border, both firearms and drugs, a goal-line stance doesn't work. You have to work in the red zones. What I mean by that is that you have to conduct organized crime investigations into the people who are involved in this enterprise criminal activity. That means good collaboration and co-operation between law enforcement agencies on both sides of the border. The RCMP for us leads the integrated border enforcement teams, IBETs, and they also work very collaboratively internationally.

I will tell you, because I was part of the international law enforcement community for a very long period of time, that this collaboration is the only way we can effectively respond to transnational crime trends.

● (1620)

Mr. Sven Spengemann: Mr. Blair, is human trafficking part of your mandate? If so, can you give the committee an update on what the government is doing?

Hon. Bill Blair: Human trafficking, inasmuch as it's an organized criminal activity, and it most certainly is, is also within my mandate. The government is making significant investments and working very closely with community partners in order to ensure that we have strong laws, but also the resources that are necessary to tackle this.

This also has a significant international component. Working collaboratively, under the leadership of the RCMP, with our international partners is a significant part of that work.

In my experience, human trafficking is an organized, criminal activity. It's organized crime, and it requires a robust response.

Mr. Sven Spengemann: How important is reducing recruitment as the pathway to organized crime?

Hon. Bill Blair: There are a number of portals into organized criminal activity. Sometimes we think of it as traditional organized crime, but frankly organized criminal activity can include the recruitment of young people in poor, marginalized communities where there is a strong sense of exclusion and social injustice.

Exclusion would initially be through drug trafficking. In my experience, in the national threat assessment—which I can't talk about too much, I guess—there are several hundred organized crime groups in this country, and they make the vast majority of their money through the illicit drug trade. The recruitment of young people into those things is a significant issue for us, and frankly the threat of enforcement isn't the only way to deal with that. Making investments in young people and communities to help them make better choices is an important part of our strategy.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Spengemann.

Thank you, Minister.

Ms. Alleslev, welcome to the committee. You have five minutes.

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Just to clarify, Minister, we heard you say earlier that you are not going to achieve zero people illegally crossing the border from safe spaces like upstate New York.

Hon. Bill Blair: I believe you might have heard someone else say that. I said our goal is to eliminate irregular migration.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Just a moment ago you said that. You said zero.

Exactly how many people who have illegally crossed into Canada and claimed asylum have been removed from Canada?

Hon. Bill Blair: They are all entitled, as I've indicated, to lawful due process. There is a backlog. We've actually put $173 million, including $74 million into IRB to increase their capacity to deal with that backlog. We also have a significant—

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Not the backlog.... How many have been removed?

Hon. Bill Blair: From which group? We have been removing people as a result of those IRB hearings.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Of the irregular border crossers who have gone through the process, how many have been removed?

Hon. Bill Blair: That surge actually began in 2017, and the vast majority of those people are still in the process of having their eligibility to remain in Canada determined.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: In French, if I could—

Hon. Bill Blair: When that is completed, then it is the role of CBSA to effect an orderly removal.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: You don't have a number.

[*Translation*]

After saying that the overwhelming majority of immigrants had left the country, you backed down and admitted that you had misspoken. Now we learn that only six individuals have been subject to a removal order.

How many immigrants have been deported, exactly?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: First of all, if I may just clarify with respect to refugee claimants, in 2017-18, the CBSA removed a total of 4,184 failed refugee claimants. Of these, 124—

Ms. Leona Alleslev: That's not what I said. I said, how many of the irregular border crossers have been removed?

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you for the opportunity to answer that question.

Of these, 124 were irregular migrants who have been removed.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: The number is 124 since when, Minister?

Hon. Bill Blair: In the fiscal year 2017-18....

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Minister, it sounds like the costs of irregular crossings to taxpayers are mounting.

If we tally the costs that taxpayers are being asked to foot the bill for, there's the cost of you, a new minister, to deal with irregular border crossing. There's the cost of additional police and IRB processing to address the increase in volume and the backlog. There's the cost of hotel rooms and social support services to support these individuals for an indefinite period of time.

Has the Prime Minister given you a blank cheque to charge Canadians an unlimited and undefined amount, rather than addressing and eliminating the issue of irregular border crossing?

Hon. Bill Blair: No, Ms. Alleslev, of course not.

We are in fact making significant investments to restore a significantly diminished capacity at CBSA and IRB, to do the job of upholding Canadian law. That's what we are doing.

● (1625)

Ms. Leona Alleslev: But if there were no irregular border crossing—

Hon. Bill Blair: That's what we are doing.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: —we wouldn't have to spend this kind of money.

Hon. Bill Blair: We're putting the resources back that were previously gutted from those budgets.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Minister, Canada's condo market has become a haven for transnational organized crime to launder illegal money. How much illegal money is being laundered into Canada through our lax regulations?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think there is clearly an issue with respect to money laundering in this country. I spoke earlier in my remarks about the work of Dr. Peter German in British Columbia. I think there's important insight and advice—

Ms. Leona Alleslev: How much, though? Give us an estimate.

Hon. Bill Blair: I don't have a dollar amount and its scope, but what I can tell you is that we've clearly identified it as an issue.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Minister, how can you address the problem if you don't know what the scope of the problem is?

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, perhaps I can turn to senior officials who are doing more timely work on that.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: But you're the minister, so you should have a ballpark idea of how big the problem is to be able to address it.

Hon. Bill Blair: Can I tell you that the laundering of money in Canada is unacceptable to us? It's a significant criminal enterprise.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Is the number increasing? Has it increased in the last year?

Hon. Bill Blair: I can tell you that the evidence that has been presented, particularly in the report that was conducted in British Columbia, strongly indicates that there is a serious problem that does need to be addressed and it's my job to go and address it.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Minister. FINTRAC has provided more than 2,015 disclosures of actionable financial intelligence. The amount of actionable intelligence has increased by over 120% since 2012. If the amount of actionable information is increasing, then one perhaps could argue that the amount and the scope of the problem is increasing.

The Chair: Unfortunately, we have to leave it there.

Ms. Dabrusin, you have five minutes please.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin (Toronto—Danforth, Lib.): Thank you, Minister. I'm happy to have you here today, and I was very happy to have you in my community over the weekend to talk with members of my community because, as everyone here knows, my community was directly impacted by gun violence in a public space, when there was a mass shooting on July 22. Then, a month to the day after that, along the Danforth again, there was another shooting where a life was lost, so it's an issue that is very much in the hearts of many people in my community.

The town hall meeting we had was very interesting. I see that part of your mandate letter involves responding to gang activity and involvement in gangs. We had some experts speaking. We had Mr. Louis March from Zero Gun Violence Movement, who spoke about the need to "ban poverty" and to address poverty.

Professor Scot Wortley from the University of Toronto talked about how a lot of people who were present at the town hall who were against any further restrictions on handguns were pushing for stronger laws and deterrents, but he said people have to have something to lose for deterrents to work. We really have to get to those root causes in communities that might turn people toward gang activity.

I was wondering if you could speak about the need to address violence in our communities and gang activity, and about the need to address the causes that were addressed by Mr. March and Professor Wortley.

Hon. Bill Blair: I've worked on the issue of gangs in Toronto. I will tell you as well that, as I've travelled across the country, I've learned that the nature of gangs and the origin of gangs, the social circumstances and determinants, are different in different places in the country. Lower Mainland B.C. is a little different from Toronto. It varies around Saskatoon in indigenous communities. There are different issues, but what we often see is that there are significant issues of poverty, as you've mentioned, the lack of access to services, a sense of social injustice and disparity that can exist in those communities.

In my experience, for many of the young men who get involved in gang activity and then subsequently in gang violence, they're not really thinking about the consequences of their act. I've been involved in the apprehension and arrest of many of them and in large investigations into the individuals and organizations involved in that criminal activity. Many of them don't see a future for themselves, exactly as you indicated, and so I think it's really important that we do more than simply interdict the supply of guns or incarcerate those who commit crimes.

It is the job of the police to investigate and to bring to justice those who are responsible for that violence, but if all we do is invest in enforcing the law, we tend to stay awfully busy. You actually have to go into communities, and this is something that I will tell you with some experience in Toronto. You have to go into communities and change the circumstances under which that violence takes place.

That is not just a policing activity. It's an investment in housing. It's an investment in communities. It's an investment in kids. It's support for those youth groups and organizations, as represented by Mr. March, that actually can make a real difference in those communities, help those young people make better choices. We recognize there is no one simple solution to the issue of gun violence. I know many people will focus on one solution and say if we only did this, that would solve the problem. In my experience, you have to do a thousand things and you have to do them well. We should not be afraid to do anything that makes our community safer. I think it is a responsibility that we all share, that we do all of the things that will keep our communities and our kids safe.

● (1630)

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: I'll say that the strong response following the incidents in my community, with members of my community, is concern about the supply of guns and wanting to reduce the supply of guns on our streets.

I've heard a lot about statistics back and forth, but no one has actually said, from all of the discussions about statistics, that the number of legally sourced guns that have ended up within our illegal markets on our streets is zero. What I understand is that—and it comes from the Toronto police as well—there are still purchases. Professor Scot Wortley talked about people lending guns or having people legally purchase guns.

Is it correct that at least some of the guns that are ending up on our streets may have originally come from domestic sources that were illegal?

The Chair: Unfortunately the time has run out on the question.

We started a little late and there has been a bit of back and forth. I think we'll go with Mr. Dubé for the final three minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Thank you for allowing me these last few minutes, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, I would like to ask you a question about your mandate letter, but which we have had little chance to talk about today: customs pre-clearance. The letter mentions expanding pre-clearance operations. Clearly, you are aware about the controversy surrounding Bill C-23, especially with regard to the powers given to American customs officers on Canadian soil.

I would just like to know whether you are able to tell us whether expanding pre-clearance operations means that they will be available at a greater number of locations, or that greater powers will be given to American officers. In that case, we will have to review the various agreements we currently have with the United States.

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: I am quite prepared to look at pre-clearance where it is appropriate and where it will actually improve the experience of moving back and forth across the border for Canadians. We're looking at ways in which we can improve it.

I think the movement of goods and services across that border is good for the Canadian economy. It is not my intention to change the authorities that U.S. agents operating on Canadian soil would have under the existing legislation. I think it's important to always ensure that anyone enforcing the law or rules in Canada uphold and respect Canadian law and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. That's an important principle that has to be maintained.

We will look at ways in which we can continue to improve the experience and the efficiency of people moving back and forth across our borders. We will always stand up for Canadian rights and Canadian law.

Mr. Matthew Dubé: I appreciate that, Minister.

My final question, before my time runs out, is just to ask if you can give us more information on what this public consultation on a potential handgun ban will look like. We've heard it announced that it's happening. Is it going to be more town halls, like in Ms. Dabrusin's community? What's the format going to be for this consultation?

Hon. Bill Blair: I'll try to be very brief, Mr. Chair.

We are going to have an online portal where all Canadians can contribute and have a say, because this is an issue that impacts communities and Canadians right across the country.

I will be conducting a number of expert round tables where we'll be inviting expertise and opinions from all sides of this discussion and debate.

We are also going to do an analysis of the data, and where the data is incomplete, we will find a way to make it as informative, effective and useful as possible.

We will examine closely the experience in other jurisdictions that have enacted other measures to ensure they are effective. I want an opportunity to invite submissions from interested parties that can inform this discussion and debate.

● (1635)

The Chair: Thank you.

On behalf of the committee, Minister, thank you for your appearance and that of your officials. As I said at the beginning, and you reiterated it, I hope you see this committee as more friendly than less, and more helpful than less.

I just remind colleagues on the subcommittee that we will be in camera in another five minutes after the room clears.

We will suspend.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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